

Cifesboren

by Shelagh Power-Chopra

Hermon pushed his third wife home in his rusty wheelbarrow; her hair, a long golden nest parading behind them in the mud. She had no name, for her tribe—her people of the North, were often so cold, one never wasted good energy on words, they simply nodded and made gestures at one another, keeping the economy of the village a well-oiled machine. After all the world was only meant for plowing the land, rolls in the hay and drinking and there was little time for small talk. His new wife was simply, “six nods, and two finger wags”, the name her dead husband had given her. His previous wife had been “two shakes of the head and seven claps”.

It was early spring now, almost time to make jam, a comfort to the lonely young men—bachelors, most all of them, never to enjoy the succulent home canned tidbits enjoyed by the fat married burghers who slept on old stools and rested their legs on tables at the village pub, “The Flake of the Fish” on Sundays. As he shuffled her through the door, he looked down at her legs, they puzzled him: pale and heavy, like thick slabs of oleo and they reminded him of his cruel grandmother: the hisses, the sponge baths, the pig gut tourniquets. It gave him quite a fright but the rest of her was quite good: tense, cruel curls and frantic gestures, and he imagined a steam engine coming at him most nights, powerful and dedicated.

But he was worried, in the weeks to come, she was rather placid in the kitchen, the borscht was too thin, the Krapta gooey, the potatoes were even glowing one night. But vanity often gets the best of men, especially stout aging men who once reigned the village with tight chests and bandied boots. “I demand my manhood be redeemed!”, he declared one evening to his wife but she wasn't there.

He nodded six times, and waged his stubby fingers repeatedly, forgetting she was simply two wags of the forefinger and a thin waif

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of girl came running over. "You are not my wife!" he shouted. "Where she be?" And he searched the village, peeking in silos, wells and women's' cupboards. Finally he found his wife—it was last at night, the village air smelled of horses hooves and burlap and fresh baked bread; one head roll and a snap must be baking, he thought, for hers was the best rye around. "I have failed somehow," he shouted out to the night, " Alas, I must return her, wheel her back to the North where she may sit and chatter on with yaks and ostriches and the other divorcees."

Just then his wife stormed out from the smokey filled cloisters of the Flake of the Fish; drunk and disheveled, her blouse strings loose, her woollen skirt raised above her knees. "Cifesboren!", she shouted and ran towards him, her chubby fists beating at the cold air. It was the single word she was taught by her people and it meant "bastard" in her ornery language and she was told she must only to use it in dire emergencies. She trampled upon Hermon with her heavy thighs and thirsty sandals and he lay so still on the cold earth, so very still, staring up at the bleak little stars and thought, "I am wounded but ready now."

